Charles Dickens

1. Dickens’s life

- Born in Portsmouth in 1812.
- Unhappy childhood: he had to work in a factory at the age of 12 (his father went to prison for debts).
- He became a newspaper reporter with the pen name Boz.
- In 1836 *Sketches by Boz*, articles about London people and scenes, were published in instalments.
1. Dickens’s life


- Busy editor of magazines.

- Died in 1870.
2. The setting of Dickens’s novels

• Dickens was the great novelist of cities, especially London.

• London is depicted at three different social levels:

  1. **the parochial world** of the workhouses → its inhabitants belong to the lower middle class.
  2. **the criminal world** → murderers, pickpockets living in squalid slums.
  3. **the Victorian middle class** → respectable people believing in human dignity.
2. The setting of Dickens’s novels

- Detailed description of “Seven Dials”, a notorious slum district - its sense of disorientation and confinement is clearly expressed in Dickens’s novels

Gustave Doré and Blanchard Jerrold, Dudley Street, Seven Dials from London: A Pilgrimage, 1872.
3. Dickens’s characters

Dickens shifted the social frontiers of the novel: the 18th-century realistic upper middle-class world was replaced by the one of the lower orders.

He depicted Victorian society in all its variety, its richness and its squalor.

3. Dickens’s characters

He created:

- **caricatures** □ he exaggerated and ridiculed peculiar social characteristics of the middle, lower and lowest classes
- **weak female characters**

He was on the side of the poor, the outcast, the working-class.

4. Dickens’s themes

- Family, childhood and poverty — the subjects to which he returned time and again.

- Dickens’s children are either innocent or corrupted by adults.

A scene from Roman Polanski’s *Oliver Twist* (2005)
Charles Dickens

4. Dickens’s themes

- Most of these children begin in **negative circumstances** and rise to **happy endings** which resolve the **contradictions** in their life created by the **adult world**.

  A scene from Roman Polanski’s *Oliver Twist* (2005)
5. Dickens’s aim

Dickens tried to get the common intelligence of the country to alleviate social sufferings.

He was a campaigning novelist and his books highlight all the great Victorian controversies:

- the faults of the legal system (*Oliver Twist*)
- the horrors of factory employment (*David Copperfield, Hard Times*)
- scandals in private schools (*David Copperfield*)
5. Dickens’s aim

Dickens tried to get the common intelligence of the country to alleviate social sufferings.

He was a campaigning novelist and his books highlight all the great Victorian controversies:

- the miseries of prostitution
- the appalling living conditions in slums (*Bleak House*)
- corruption in government (*Bleak House*)
6. Dickens’s style

Dickens’s style is very rich and original.

The main stylistic features of his novels are:

1. **long list of objects and people.**
2. **adjectives used in pairs or in group of three and four.**
3. **several details, not strictly necessary.**
6. Dickens’s style

Dickens’s style → very rich and original

The main **stylistic features** of his novels are:

4. **repetitions of the same word/s and/or sentence structure.**

5. **the same concept/s is/are expressed more than once, but with different words.**

6. **use of antithetical images in order to underline the characters’ features.**
6. Dickens’s style

Dickens’s style is very rich and original.

The main stylistic features of his novels are:

7. exaggeration of the characters’ faults.

8. suspense at the end of the episodes or introduction of a sensational event to keep the readers’ interest.
7. Oliver Twist (1838)

- This *Bildungsroman* (an "education" novel) appeared in instalments in 1837.

- It fictionalises the humiliations Dickens experienced during his childhood.

Etching by George Cruikshank of scene from *Oliver Twist* by Charles Dickens as Oliver asks for more food in workhouse.

(c) www.workhouses.org.uk

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7. Oliver Twist (1838)

- The protagonist, Oliver Twist, is always innocent and pure and remains incorruptible throughout the novel.

- At the end he is saved from a life of villainy by a well-to-do family.

- The setting is London.

Etching by George Cruikshank of scene from Oliver Twist by Charles Dickens as Oliver asks for more food in workhouse.
7. Oliver Twist (1838)

- Dickens attacked:

  a. the social evils of his times such as poor houses, unjust courts and the underworld.

Etching by George Cruikshank of scene from Oliver Twist by Charles Dickens as Oliver asks for more food in workhouse.
7. *Oliver Twist* (1838)

- Dickens attacked:

  b. the world of **the workhouses** founded upon the idea that poverty was a consequence of laziness.

Etching by George Cruikshank of scene from *Oliver Twist* by Charles Dickens as Oliver asks for more food in workhouse.
c. the officials of the workhouses because they abused the rights of the poor as individuals and caused them further misery.

Etching by George Cruikshank of scene from *Oliver Twist* by Charles Dickens as Oliver asks for more food in workhouse.
This novel is the most autobiographical of all Dickens’s novels. In the preface the novelist wrote: “… like many fond parents, I have in my heart a favourite child. And his name is David Copperfield”.
8. David Copperfield (1849-50)

- **Narrative technique** ▶ a "Bildungsroman"; the protagonist, David, functions also as narrator.

- **The characters** ▶ both realistic and romantic, characterised by a particular psychological trait.

- **Atmosphere** ▶ a combination of realism and enchantment.

Advertisement for *David Copperfield* by Charles Dickens, 1884.
8. David Copperfield (1849-50)

• Themes:

1. the struggle of the weak in society.

2. the great importance given to strict education.

3. cruelty to children.

4. the bad living conditions of the poor.
It is a “denunciation novel” of a powerful accusation of some of the negative effects of industrial society.

The setting is Coketown, an imaginary industrialised town.

Characters are people living and working in Coketown, like the protagonist Thomas Gradgrind, an educator who believes in facts and statistics.
9. Hard Times (1854)

Themes:

1. a critic of materialism and Utilitarianism.

2. a denunciation of the ugliness and squalor of the new industrial age.

3. the gap between the rich and the poor.

Aim to illustrate the dangers of allowing people to become like machines.